

Our Troops Deserve a Modern Day Truman Commission- May 12, 2005

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By Rep. Louise M. Slaughter

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Famed writer and political commentator George Orwell once wrote that, "People sleep peaceably in their beds at night only because rough men stand ready to do violence on their behalf." Even when we are not sleeping peaceably, and are instead working, or striving, or worrying about the events of our lives, we must remember that we are given the chance to do these things by those men and women who have decided that their personal safety and security is less important than the safety and security of their fellow Americans. Our soldiers are fighting and dying every day for us, and for this, we can never begin to thank them enough.

We can, however, work to make sure that their labors are no more trying than they already are. We can work to make sure that they have the money they need, the equipment they need, and the tools they need to be successful. We can try our best to ensure that at the pivotal moment, when they are thousands of miles from home and are confronted by a challenge which may endanger their life, they will never fall short THERE simply because we have fallen short HERE.

During World War II, Harry Truman established what became known as the Truman Commission. The Commission consisted of a group of dedicated public servants who were committed to examining all financial and military transactions related to the war effort. Their work served to expose and eliminate any waste, mismanagement, or corruption which could have detracted from the effectiveness of Allied troops. The accountability and efficiency which they helped to create and defend was pivotal to winning the war. The money, time, and resources which the Commission saved could be used to build another helmet, or another bullet, or another tank. And these individual pieces added up to a truly historic whole.

Today, we are deeply involved in another war. It is a different kind of war, one which has been divisive and has strained our nation and our Congress. But regardless of how we personally felt at the beginning of the conflict, we all feel the same about how we want it to end: in victory. We want the people of Iraq to live in a prosperous and safe nation, a country free of its past tyranny and ready to embrace a new era of liberty and limitless possibility. And we want our troops - our children - to return home just as they left it, so that they, too, can pursue their dreams, whatever they may be.

Both of these universally supported objectives are served by a post-war effort which is free from the oppressiveness of fraud and a lack of accountability. And yet, our reconstruction efforts in Iraq are saddled with exactly these blights - not by any fault of our troops, but by the refusal of our government to reign in and properly manage those in charge of this reconstruction. Numerous private contractors were given huge contracts following the war to carry out a variety of tasks in Iraq - to rebuild its water and electrical grids for example - and billions of dollars have been earmarked to be spent on restarting Iraq's economy and civil society. And yet, our Congress has never acted to ensure that the companies hired have been trustworthy, or that the billions and billions of dollars in reconstruction funds thus far spent have been used in responsible ways. No equivalent of the historic Truman commission has ever been created by our leaders, even though they portray our current conflict as being just as epic in scope and significance as the great conflict which helped to shape our society and our world some six decades ago.

What has been the result? Sadly, it has been all too predictable. In 2004, the American public became aware that Halliburton - the company with perhaps more ties to the White House than any other and a recipient of billions of dollars worth of reconstruction contracts - had been overcharging the Army for gasoline, inflating its profits at the expense of our troops. Then, earlier this year, the Special Inspector General for the Iraqi Reconstruction released a study stating that nothing less than \$9 billion dollars in reconstruction money - nearly 5 percent of the total amount of money spent on the War - could not be accounted for. And just last week, new reports revealed that approximately \$100 million theoretically spent on small yet vital building projects between 2003 and 2004 has simply disappeared, most likely into a black hole of unchecked fraud and incompetence.

Every dollar which is lost in Iraq is a dollar which could have been used to stabilize the country and protect our troops. It is a dollar which could have been used to help our soldiers to complete their mission so that they can come home sooner. Indeed, every dollar wasted is a dollar spent fighting against, rather than for, our men and women in uniform.

Long recognizing that massive gaps in accountability exist regarding the reconstruction effort, I and my Democratic colleagues have on numerous occasions called for the creation of a modern-day Truman Commission, a body tasked with monitoring post-war U.S. government activities in Iraq and making sure that money and resources go where they are supposed to go - not into the pockets of a corrupt contractor or into the black hole of confusion produced by the fog of war, but to the Iraqis and American soldiers who need them.

But no such commission has been created, solely because the Republican majority in Congress has consistently opposed any amendment which would lead to its creation. What could explain this seemingly incomprehensible lack of interest in protecting our troops and helping them to win the war they are in? Republican legislators have never explained

their intransigence, but I suspect it is the product of their inherent fear of being held accountable for their actions.

Democrats in the House have seen this fear in action for years now, as the Republican majority has done everything it can to stand in the way of transparent and responsible governance. They have changed ethics rules to protect their party leadership, worked to undermine the enforcers of democratic conduct in the Congress, and sought to hide controversial legislation within larger bills in order to avoid having to debate its merits.

The same lack of respect for ethical and responsible conduct which the Majority has brought to the floor of the House regarding domestic issues has now infected its conduct of American foreign policy.

Republicans have sought to hide the shameful lapses in judgment and accountability which have dogged our troops in Iraq rather than addressing and correcting them. This time, the consequences of their actions could not be more severe. By refusing to monitor post-war events in Iraq with a truly concerned eye, our soldiers have been directly endangered, left to struggle against the whims of unregulated companies and the irregularities of chance.

Our troops have been fighting two wars at once: one against a vicious insurgency which seeks to see them fail, and one against a self-interested party which seeks above all else to see itself escape being held accountable for its own mistakes and lapses in judgment. Such an approach to government must be ferociously opposed. Let us bring decency and accountability back to the House. Let us reconstitute a new Truman Commission dedicated to eliminating the corruption and waste plaguing American conduct in Iraq, and more broadly, reconstitute our commitment to honest and open government. We must do this not just for the good of the people of America, but for the good of the young men and women who are risking everything so that we may have a chance to live in society which is truly worthy of their ultimate sacrifice.